

# CHARLIE

Charlie is a dedicated worker at Burning Man. Her journey into the community began at age 17 with regional events, and she attended her first Burning Man at 19. Living in the Bay Area for ten years, she formed connections with many Burners as well as members of the DPW and Gate crew. Charlie spent a decade working with Fire Conclave as a helmsman before joining the DPW in 2015. In 2016, Charlie experienced a severe cycling accident but showed remarkable resilience, returning to the DPW in 2017 to work with the TSA Department, which efficiently sorts all trash and resources.

This interview was conducted by “Flo,” Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2017 at the sorting station by the dumpsters during the Joshua Tree Festival, where Flo also liked volunteering for trash sorting. Flo’s questions have been omitted to improve the reading flow.



## “I grew up with hippies who love recycling stuff.”

I grew up in New Jersey, but I lived in San Francisco for a decade until I got priced out and started travelling the world. Now I live in the Santa Cruz mountains.

I started going to regional events when I was 17 years old. Then I went out to Burning Man when I was 19. Then I proceeded to go to Burning Man for 11 years, and then on my 11th year/my 10th year, I tried to do DPW. I tried to connect with the person in charge, and it just didn’t



Charlie on Playa. Photo credit: Josh Keppel, 2013.

happen. Then I was introduced to the people who were, you know, getting people through it. It just didn’t work out that year. So, the next year I started working post event. Basically, my friends who were DPW and Gate said, “Wait, you’re not DPW or Gate?” So, the next year I worked DPW and Gate, and I decided I was more DPW.

My first year at DPW was 2015. This is my second season because last year there was the accident and everything. I was in Australia. But I’ve been friends with DPW workers pretty much the entire time I’ve been going.

For example, the announcement of “Chaos is passing,” at morning meeting, was very hard for me to take because we had been friends since I was 20. Boy Chaos, not Chaos: Boy Chaos. Boy Chaos Bishop. He was ESD, he ran a camp called Spikes, which was a vampire bar. I had known him since I was twenty years old.

So, Boy Chaos had done DPW for a really long time, but due to the past few years of failing health, he hasn’t been able to come. He’s had liver failure; he’s had multiple motorcycle accidents. He was in his forties. So, he lived a hard life, and he was one of the first DPW members that I became friends with. It eventually came to the point where they knew I worked, and I always had a staff ticket through fire conclave doing other sort of things with the burn.

I do spin fire, but I was mostly a helmsman: a stage director. So, I tell them where the fuel goes, I tell them where to start and when to stop. I listen on the radio for the cues and everything. I can tell them what’s happening as it’s going. I did that for a total of ten years. I did safety for the first year or two, and then helmsman from then on. So, being that I’ve been involved with working this whole time, I did know people who were in DPW and worked.

In 2015 it was sort of brought to people’s attention that I was not

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DPW. They were always like, “Wait, why?” I’ve always had a job to go back to. I’ve always had school to go back to. There has always been some sort of societal demand for me. This year there was none, or that year there was none, so I decided I would do it.

I’ve been pretty well connected with the whole DPW/Gate crew anyway. I joined something called Jerk Church like four or five years ago. It’s all made up of people who work at Burning Man. It’s a weekly event on Sunday where you get together and barbecue, play music, have drinks, and do sustainable jackassery the best you can. Yeah, it just felt inevitable.

I like Gate and everything, but I don’t know... I’d rather be in the dumpster than on the front lines.

I grew up with hippies who love recycling stuff. My friends are the people who work at the Trash—like, my good friends. I’m friends with my managers. One of my managers at the Transfer station is legitimately a close friend of mine. So, having people that know me that well and not having to edit the nihilist out of me. There’s a lot of positions in DPW now where you have to be front facing and you have to be a public figure. At the Trash station we’re removed from the event. We’re all the way the fuck over there. People don’t even realize we exist.

So, we are only dealing face to face with other DPW people and ESD: people who are involved in the Org. So, we can be fun with them. We can have the better communication, and when you’re working with something like Gate, you’re talking to participants and you’re entering them into your community and into your home. You can be a bit gruff, but at the same time, you’re supposed to have the welcoming. You’re not a Greeter, but you’re still the first person they interact with at Burning Man. So, I’d rather hang out with us and our friends, and talk shit, and crush cans, and pull tabs, jump on metal, throw glass. You know, while doing it for the betterment of our environment and community.

This year at post event, there were some of the worst dust storms, I’ve ever seen in the 12 years I’ve gone. They were brownouts and blackouts. The daytime one: we closed the Trash station early because we saw it coming from about an hour and a half away. We watched it roll in. The JOC TSA, which is where the police are, at their Trash station they needed some help. There’s TSA people assigned to them. They needed some help with something, so we drive towards the storm, towards the JOC.

The entire time, I’m like, “This is a bad idea, this is a bad idea, this is why we closed the station early.” We get there and we’re not needed anyway. Mr. Blue is there. So immediately I’m like, “Let’s go!” Pepe has her fluffer van there. She’s like, “I know we need to leave!” slams her door and drives away. I’m just here like, “Knots! Knots! Knots!” Come on! Finally, he gets in the truck two or three minutes later. We start to pull out, and then the whiteout hits. Yeah, and so, I’m with some of my really close friends: it’s not the end of the world.

So, we’re doing the slow roll. We can basically do one mile an hour, and as long as you just keep that you can see a few feet in front of you. Then it’s brownouts and we have to stop. Then it’s whiteouts again! Keep rolling. Op, that’s a hand wash station. It’s fine. We need to stop. So, we stopped.

I happen to have a beer in my pocket. We put in it park, we turned off the car, and this is now waiting. So, I drink my beer, we all talk, we laugh. It was super funny because Knots had pre-dusted Pinecone accidentally by driving through dunes. She was the only person in the vehicle who was entirely dusted. We were making fun of her before, and now there we were all entirely coated inside and out with this, laughing our faces out at how stupid it was. Because we saw this coming! We drove into it!

So, we eventually started slow crawling and got back to the TSA. The dust cleared out, and the people we had left at the TSA had all stayed in the container remaining dust free. So, they come out still clean. We all just start—so coated—and Knots pulls off his mask and its skin tone here and white everywhere else. We were all like, alright, this is one of those things we have to take a picture for. This is a picture moment. Everybody in the back.

So, there we are, flipping off the camera, grinning wildly, snarling because we had just gotten through this thing that we knew better than to do, but did. But it was so much fun! I wouldn’t have traded it for the world. That was a stupid idea, and I’m so happy that we did it. Fuck yeah.

And it’s the Trash kids! We’re a little filthy anyway! What’s a little dust on us? You know? I really did want that beer. So, at that stop I just drank it. [chuckles] Yeah. Wouldn’t have traded it for the world.